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The Shortcomings of Support: A 2020 Meta-Reflection

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March 2020: The Shortcoming of Postpartum Support

The Spring quarter begins in a week, and I was just informed that I would be teaching online. I am feeling disheartened, anxious, flustered and imbalanced. I suppose I should be grateful that I still am able to teach the course I have been developing for the last ten months, "Communication in the New Media Age", but a part of me cannot help but be disappointed that this will be taught asynchronously online. Or perhaps I am feeling imbalanced due to new motherhood, as I just gave birth a few weeks ago, and I am still trying to adapt. I knew that becoming a mother during my Ph.D. program would bring its challenges, but I had not accounted for experiencing a pandemic in the midst of my program. I feel like grief is setting in, as I begin to become acutely aware of how this pandemic may drastically affect my program. I am almost complete with coursework, and I am now realizing that last Fall was probably the last time I would physically be in classes on campus as a student. I adore that time in class, to physically be with my peers and discuss our ideas, is it really possible I may not get that in the remainder of my time here? I was looking forward to being back on campus, engaging with my students, my peers and feeling connected once again. The disconnection I was experiencing was not surprising, I immediately assumed it was baby blues. I had asked my doctor and my nurses countless times if there was anything I could do to lessen the baby blues, or if that was even possible, but I was reminded of how normal it is, and how a prescription may be able to help. It didn't feel normal, and somehow, them reminding me that it is was not as helpful as I had hoped. I was definitely feeling disconnected though, and felt so guilty because of it. I feel guilty for feeling disconnected to begin with, and for being excited to be back on campus. I feel guilty that despite the wonderful support I was receiving from my partner and from my family, I still felt disconnected and felt like I was missing something. I feel guilty that my children, family, friends and loved ones are safe and healthy, and yet I still have these feelings when it could be so much worse. I have stability in a time of such uncertainty, do I really have a right to feel disconnected, imbalanced, and disheartened? These feelings must be baby blues, and there is not much I can do besides waiting for it to pass. Time will pass, the quarter will begin online, and perhaps in a few weeks, I will be feeling better.

The start of the pandemic brought a variety of feelings, as it abruptly began to deeply impact our lives as we knew it. For those who experienced new parenthood at the start of the pandemic, they were faced with the challenges and obstacles that often come with a newborn, in addition to the uncertainty and worry that accompanies a pandemic. Social support is not only a necessary component to our well being (Cohen, 1988) but it also can provide a significant buffer to postpartum depression and baby blues (Negron et al., 2013). Baby blues, or "postpartum blues", along with postpartum depression, are not talked about to the lengths that they should be to provide new parents with support

and knowledge necessary to navigate their new roles and reality (Bass and Bauer, 2018). Statistically, postpartum blues occur in 50%-80% of new mothers, and postpartum depression occurs in 13%-20% of women following childbirth (Earls et al., 2010). As discussed in medical research, postpartum depression screening is not as accessible as it should be, and educating new parents on both postpartum blues and postpartum depression needs to be better implemented, and in itself, can be very supportive (Kerker, et al., 2016). However, how has the support surrounding postpartum blues and postpartum depression faltered ever more during the spread of COVID-19? Considering that the support in this area was lacking for some new parents, due to inaccessibility and lack of knowledge, it is important to acknowledge how new mothers were silenced even further because of the pandemic.

May 2020: The Shortcoming of Social Support

We are well into the Spring quarter now, and I feel like everyone around me is struggling. My students are struggling, my peers are struggling, and adapting to an online teaching and learning environment has not been as easy as I had hoped. I feel as if I am struggling to stay on top of everything I need to do. The connection I craved only a few weeks ago has yet to come, and I am feeling continuously disconnected, barely surviving deadlines and school responsibilities. I find myself looking forward to the end of the quarter, just to be able to breathe again. I love the material we are reading and discussing in the courses I am taking, but I am finding it difficult to fully immerse myself like I usually do. I don't feel like I am being a good student or a good teacher, and I am saddened by that, since I passionately love both. I need to improve, do better, and be better, but I find it is easier now more than ever to feel overwhelmed and suffocated. Perhaps my baby blues are hanging around longer than I originally anticipated. The amount of grief and helplessness I am feeling is heavy. And of course, I feel guilty for this. I have a support system, and that has been instrumental in the last few weeks, but everyone is experiencing the pandemic, we all need support, and we are all trying to survive these times. I think it is safe to say that we are running ourselves thin, trying to keep up with the day-to-day tasks, while also enacting support to those we love and care for. I feel guilty for feeling as if I am grieving, again, I could have it so much worse. COVID-19 continues to spread, and my students are impacted by it; they are becoming ill, or their family members are, and they are also struggling to stay afloat of their school responsibilities. I am compassionate to their situations, and I am altering parts of my class to ensure flexibility, even if it is vastly different from how I designed it, and imagined it would be. I feel like we are all in survival mode, trying to adjust and adapt, while maintaining our performances and responsibilities. I wish I could provide my peers and loved ones with more support, I try to be as supportive as possible, to be there for them, but I feel like I am lacking in that role. I feel like I can talk about the pandemic, and what is going on in the world, constantly, and still not fully process the detrimental impact.

By May 2020, it felt as if people were still in shock as to what the world was experiencing with the spread of COVID-19. We were trying to turn to one another for support, but truthfully, we weren't in the strongest or most energized position to be offering and enacting support. There was not enough support to go around to everyone, partly due to the fact that there was no accurate way we could prepare for a pandemic, and the emotional turmoil it would bring to us. Everyone was experiencing a variety of feelings, from grief, to anxiety and stress. It is important to consider how social support falters in situations of trauma and national emergency. How do we provide support for others when we are all seeking additional support to cope with the circumstances that accompany a pandemic? For some, by not receiving enough support, disenfranchised grief may have begun to set in, did we have a legitimate reason to feel as if we were grieving something? There were feelings of grief not being validated (Doka, 2002). The spread of COVID-19 had an impact on individuals, all of who experienced the pandemic to different degrees, but some struggled with the idea that they couldn't grieve without feeling guilty, because they had not been impacted by the pandemic at the detrimental level that some have. It seemed that in almost all situations, there was a shortcoming of support, one that we were not prepared for, but were forced to cope with.

October 2020: The Shortcoming of Support in Self-Compassion

We are well into the Fall quarter now, and I am enduring the most challenging quarter of my program yet. I am realizing that Summer was not as much of a reprieve as I had hoped, and while the break was refreshing to an extent, I was not as prepared for this quarter as I originally thought. Everything seems draining, somehow more so than the Spring quarter. Once again, my peers are struggling, my students are struggling, and with the presidential election upon us, everyone is running thin on patience, energy and motivation; we are drained. Our conversations and discussions have turned to the importance of self-compassion. I enjoy hearing about how those around me are practicing self-compassion, and coping through these times, but I find it difficult to relate to because I find myself purely in survival mode. I am trying to survive the deadlines, the expectations of being an effective instructor, parenting young children during a pandemic, and preparing for comprehensive exams. I am trying to be a good friend, partner, parent, relative, to everyone I know, being there and providing support however best I can. Self-compassion has never been a topic discussed in my education, until this year, and I think I am lacking the discipline to enact those practices right now. Now more than ever, I feel the weight of the last several months, and I know others are as well. We are exhausted. And we are all in need of support from one another, I feel like that is a direct statement being uttered on every Zoom call I am part of, and everyone is doing their best, but it feels safe to say that being overwhelmed and burnt out is making enacting support more difficult than ever.

After experiencing a consistent shortcoming of support throughout the year of 2020, those around me began enacting self-compassion as a way to cope with the pandemic, stress, tension and the societal occurrences. As Neff (2015) explains, a requirement of self-compassion is mindfulness, to essentially have the ability to not ignore our pain. Being mindful in a time where it was impossible to escape what was going on in the world, proved to be challenging. However, in a time when it was not possible to receive too much support, self-compassion was an understandable practice, and a healthy one at that. However, it became obvious that self-compassion was not necessarily normalized, considering it is not a practice that is consistently taught in all disciplines or in all industries, and that paired with possible cultural and gender norms may make it difficult for some to embrace self-compassion. Is it possible that our shortcoming of social support throughout 2020 was able to shed light on the shortcoming of support surrounding self-compassion? It makes sense that self-compassion may be taught and supported in all disciplines and industries, because social support may fall short in some cases, and when it does, self-compassion can be instrumental in aiding our well being. It should not be viewed as self-centered or selfish, but rather normalized as a practice of bettering our mental health, our well-being and our self as a whole, regardless of the obstacles and challenges we face.

It is understandable that throughout 2020, social support was not what we were used to it being; we often were in need of more support than we could possibly get due to everyone needing it, but also being exhausted from the new reality we were faced with. This reflection serves as a perspective of that shortcoming of support, but it is important to consider the bigger picture. The pandemic throttled us into a situation we were not prepared for and it impacted us in a variety of ways. The shortcoming of support did not only affect you and I, but also healthcare and frontline workers, teachers, children, those who experienced a loss of a loved one, those who experienced a job loss, and so many more. Continuing the education and research on social support is vital to further understand, not only its benefits, but both the short-term and long-term effects of its absence. The continued education and research, in addition to normalizing and practicing self-compassion, can serve as preparation for challenges and obstacles that lie ahead.

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